



NMHCCF Advocacy Brief

Issue: The Peer Workforce

Background

The mental health consumer and carer identified workforce comprises those consumer and carers who are employed specifically for their expertise developed from their lived experience of mental illness as a consumer or a carer.

The consumer and carer identified workforce are also referred to as the Peer Workforce. However, this title should not be confused with the title of Peer Support Worker, which is only one of the important roles undertaken by consumer and carer identified workers.

Key Points for Consumers and Carers

This workforce is uniquely placed to operate at the forefront of change in services, particularly when they are located in mental health services. This is because they are working with consumers and carers to identify their needs and working with service providers to negotiate ways to have these needs met.

Peer workers are an integral part of implementing recovery approaches for mental health consumers and carers. They have the knowledge and skills to provide support for consumers and carers and a conduit to effective treatments and services. They can support services by providing knowledge and insight about what works best for consumers and carers. Their presence provides a role model for recovery, helps break down stigma and contributes to vastly improved service delivery.

Peer work can also provide employment opportunities for appropriately skilled consumers and carers.

In 2010 the NMHCCF released a Position Statement: *Supporting and developing the mental health consumer and carer identified workforce – a strategic approach to recovery.*¹ The Statement outlines key recommendations for supporting and developing the Peer Workforce.

¹ See NMHCCF website <http://www.nmhccf.org.au/documents/MHCA%20CareWF%20Layout%2016-9.pdf>

Based on research conducted by the NMHCCF (including first-hand knowledge) a number of major issues have been identified with the way that many mental health consumer and carer identified worker positions are being established and supported. Those workers require the same strategic and tactical human resource management supports as all other workers, yet in many cases these conditions are not met. Further, because these workers can be in particularly challenging positions, there is an urgent need to ensure that these requirements are in place.

In its Position Statement, the NMHCCF recommended that a comprehensive national strategy is required to address the need of these workers.

Key Issues for the future

The NMHCCF also sees a significant need for consumer and carer identified workers to be employed in a range of sectors outside mental health to assist mental health consumers and carers. These sectors include the community managed sector, housing and employment support as well as the criminal justice and local government sector.

The Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council is developing a Mental Health Peer Workforce Competency Framework in consultation with consumers and carers. This framework identifies the skill and knowledge requirements for being a Peer Worker and will form part of a nationally recognised qualification in Peer Work in the Community Services Training Package. It will also assist in establishing industry standards and improve training and support mechanisms for the emerging peer workforce. For more information please visit www.cshisc.com.au.

The 4th National Mental Health Plan includes a number of strategies which will support the Peer Workforce including establishing a certified peer specialist workforce.² However, as there is no funding attached to the implementation of the plan, it is unclear what can be achieved. The NMHCCF will be monitoring the implementation of the plan through its membership of the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council Mental Health Standing Committee.

A National Mental Health Workforce Strategy is being developed by the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council National Mental Health Workforce Advisory Committee. The NMHCCF hopes that this strategy will include significant focus on the development needs of the Peer Workforce. It is due to be released later in 2011. For more information please visit www.ahwo.gov.au/mhwac.asp.

Name of Nominated NMHCCF contact on this issue

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² Australian Health Ministers, 2009, Fourth National Mental Health Plan, Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra. Available at www.health.gov.au